Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 1 | Issue 2 Article 2

May-2000

Race, Gender and Performance in Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*

Maite Escudero

Race, Gender and Performance in Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*

By Maite Escudero

"Let's bare our arms and plunge them deep deep through the laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, reflected. Then, let's sing it, dance it, write it, paint it… Let's create Something transcendentally material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic." (Aaron Douglas in a letter to Langston Hughes, 1925)

In a world of diverse cultures and societal beliefs, marginalized groups often share common experiences. Recurrent themes in the literature of black peoples include anti-imperialism, racism, sexism, exile, 'cultural schizophrenia', language, otherness and home to ancestors, just to name a few. Yet, there is no single black voice: black writing can come from everywhere in the world--America, Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and Britain. As a result, an individual may become torn between conflicting expressions by others within the same cultural group. What is at issue here is the recognition of extraordinary variation of subjective positions and cultural identities; in short, the recognition that 'black' is a culturally constructed category that is subject to change and redefinition but, at the same time, it is also symptomatic of complex tensions that may still carry the burden of black representations within Black communities. It is after all, a site of contestation over the demand of a wider space for a critique of black experience. This particularity and universality can also be found in woman-centered texts, and it is with this issue in mind that this article will explore the dynamics between race and gender in the poetry of Grace Nichols, a contemporary Caribbean-British writer.

The title of Grace Nichols's poetry collection *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* evokes, in itself, three social stereotypes: being fat, being black, and being a woman. However, such definitions remain controversial insofar as her poems constitute an overt attempt to challenge conventional (white) male definitions of black women, as well as to redefine black female identities in new and unexpected ways. Nichols's ability to create alternative spaces wherein black female experience is to have a transformative impact, relies significantly on her commitment to the body as an empowering instrument to express one's subjectivity and desires. Rather than be signified by fixed and stable cultural inscriptions, this new body appears as an active medium that is endlessly constructing itself through multiple acts and heterogenous meanings. In such a display, the female body becomes a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and subordination, of desired objects and desiring subjects.

Considering that gender alone does not fully explain black women's experiences of otherness and objectification, we should also ponder about racial and class differences when it comes to economically restructuring the labor force of women. Essential to the development of cheap labor in the capitalist economy has been black women's work. In this respect, the words of Rose M. Brewer are worth mentioning; she explains how "the labor transformation of black women has been explicated in terms of economic

restructuring and capital mobility, racial formation and gender inequality. In women's productive and reproductive labor, there is a diasporic connection with African women in the Americas, the USA, the Caribbean and South America (...) Race/gender segmentation and low wages is reflected in the positioning of African-American women, and their relationship to capital is different from that of white women. Also, within households, black women perform a significant portion of the social reproductive labor" (Brewer, 1993: 21, 24). It is from this theoretical standpoint that I would like to illustrate how our poet metaphorically disrupts the subordination of black women to capitalism by displacing the perception of what seems natural onto what is, in fact, a shifting cultural and economical given. By way of example, Nichols states:

> The daily going out
> and coming in
> always being hurried
> along
> like like ... cattle
>
> In the evenings
> returning from the fields
> she tried hard to walk
> like a woman
>
> (...)
>
> O but look
> there's a waterpot growing
> from her head (Nichols, 1984: 53, my italics)

I will show throughout the present paper the variety of other poems that depict diverse portrayals of black women. Rather than reproducing a monolithic account of black female works and stereotypes, Nichols insists on the range of subjectivities capable of producing renewing experiences with contemporary representations of race and gender. Furthermore, these portrayals relfect a self-affirmation of women's identity in which the female body as a stimulant for female writing, represents a powerful discourse to re-inscribe the world.

On this line of thinking, Nichols's message of liberation entails an engagement with French feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Nichols reclaims an exploration and celebration of multiple aspects of female identity and sexuality through the female body. As most feminist critics have pointed out, her poetry can be read as "writing the female body", as a collective écriture feminine (Griffin, 1993: 19-41). Even though I admit that such a reading is worth exploring and I shall be referring to it later on, I would also argue that Nichols's "fat black woman's body" can be taken as a cultural metaphor that seeks to open up the possibility of including new females bodies--and voices--within dominant ideological contexts. This is the main reason why her act of self-affirmation inevitably poses a conflict between a collective body and an individual one. Such a plight is rooted within a politics of gender and race

that strives for the representation of multiplicity and variation of black experiences and identities. Within this frame, the enhancement of her body is not solely directed towards the expression of a feminine essence and difference, for this would imply a certain univocity and homogeneity of the category of "woman". It is precisely at this point that French feminism, also known as 'the feminism of difference', and postmodern feminism are in conflict. French feminist's theories are often said to be empirist rather than philosophical, thus their exclusive insistence on gender as a fully humanist pursuit. Other social and constitutive factors of identity such as race, sexuality and class are systematically overlooked. Usually, their criteria rely on a self-consciousness that measures the ability of literary works to reproduce, as real as possible, women's experiences. This position, based on a universal 'feminine experience' holds on a very specific and naive definition of identity and subjectivity. Therefore, in my opinion, it is a gross simplification to use the umbrella term of 'women' for the definition of gender.

Whereas French feminists take the female body as both, a 'feminine weapon' to fight male oppression and to express gender distinction as a 'mark' of biological, linguistic and/or cultural difference, it can be stated that within Nichols's poems, her ode to the body also stands for an urgent cry to reinvent herself through a redescription and proliferation of attitudes. Through artifice and performance, she creates a variety of personas and thereby, aligns herself with the pluralistic stance of postmodernism that questions the nature of an essentialist female identity.[1] Nichols's poems do not pingeonhole femininity but endow it with different meanings and interpretations. Insofar as her "fat black woman" is endowed and riddled with definitions and qualities of her own choosing, then, Nichols resists racial and gender stereotyping, for she is self-consciously deconstructing her self through her poetry.

In what follows, thus, I shall attempt to demonstrate the extent to which her poetry aims to praise the female body as the source of identity and, ultimately, how this subversive body represents an embodiment of the uneasy tensions underlying the ambivalent relationship of the black community to the individual, and as such, provides an interesting and complex model for analysis. This is not to say, however, that this tension prevents her from speaking for the community[2] and to its needs, for part of her poems reflects so, but it rather points to her power as an individual in order to define that community and most importantly, to transform her self. In her poems, the community and the individual are wrapped in a magical and vicious circle of constant redemption and change. Envisioned as part of herself, the black community gets fatter and wider, it is "a watershed of sunlight, and strange recurring mysteries" (Nichols, 1984: 40) only through its very reliance on the diversity and complexity of the individual subject.

Bearing all these points in mind, it can be said that the division that Nichols establishes in her work is neither gratuitous nor chosen at random. The book is divided

[1] In this sense, "the fat black woman's body" can be also read in the light of Judith Butler's theory of "gender as a performative act that has no 'essence' or ontological status apart from the various acts which constitutes its reality" (1990: 136). Moreover, for Butler, "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (1990: 14)

[2] Although the term 'community' may imply a hegemonic space that reinforces certain stereotypes, there is a sense in which individual reflections on race and gender also dismantle the myth of a homogeneous black community and pursue to include diversity of identities.

into four sections, namely *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, *In Spite of Ourselves*, *Back Home Contemplation,* and *i is a long memoried woman*. Not coincidentally, the seeds of her poetry are to be found in this collection. That is why each of these poems mainly addresses both, the celebration of the female black body and the necessity of finding one's roots within the projection of the black community, all of which will be exemplified throughout the following analysis.

The overall impression when reading Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, is that these poems constitute the epitome of her endurance, vitality and spiritual strength. Her black female experience embraces a blatant resistance to passivity and alienation. Even though it is in the first section of the text that she mainly relies on the physicality of her body, the rest of her poems equally reflect a gamut of bodily acts, em-bodied by a heightened awareness of rhythm, expansion and movement. Suffice to say, in this respect, that Nichols's fat black body transcends physical traits and can be extended to the hybrid and wide content of her writing. Furthermore, transformation of female subjectivity is always possible because her language and style does not suggest one, but multiple desires. This may evoke a feeling of excess, similarly conveyed through a repetitive syntax. So, in "The Fat Black Woman Composes a Black Poem… And a Fat Poem", the reader becomes aware of Nichols's excessive use of colours and the irony that these images are meant to suggest. By challenging white assumptions of what should poetry be like, Nichols redefines 'black' in the following terms:

> Black as the intrusion
> of a rude wet tongue
>
> Black as the blackness
> of a rolling ship
>
> Black as the sweetness
> of black orchid milk
>
> Black as the spraying
> of a reggae sunsplash (Nichols, 1984: 16)

The "rude wet tongue" here associates pink with a tongue that is neither dry nor exhausted, but instead, one that is prompted to create and speak aloud that which has been silent. "Black orchid milk" evokes the colour white in relation to a black mother's milk, even though the image of the orchid, and the "reggae sunsplash" links yellow sunshine and music with the term black. In the same way, black also parallels the movement of a "rolling ship", so that a new sense of black identity can emerge. In addition, the metre in the last line ensures that the word "sunsplash" has to be articulated in a West Indian accent, with emphasis on the last syllable "sunsplash": it is as if a strong stress on "plash" would really suggest not only her inner and spiritual strength but also, through subverted smiles, the heaviness of her fat body. Ironically, by forging her singularity with regard to language and style, Nichols's poetry is loaded with an ability to re-inscribe black (women's) experiences. As Mercer K. argues: "The subversive force of this hybridizing tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself where black

English decentres, destabilises and carnivalises the linguistic domination of English, - the nation-language of master discourses- through strategic inflections, re-accentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes". (Mercer K, 1988). So, in her poem "We New World Blacks", Grace Nichols claims that:

> The timbre
> in our voice
> betrays us
> however far
> we've been
>
> whatever tongue
> we speak
> the old ghost
> asserts itself
> in dusky echoes (Nichols, 1984: 30)

Such language hybridization succinctly dramatizes a rupture with some myths and metaphors that have relegated black women to a space of endless passiveness, weakness and sameness. It also means breaking down the canonical English that essentializes language as if it were an impenetrable and irreductible category. "Fat is, as fat is, fat does, fat believes…and fat speaks for itself" (Nichols, 1984: 17). The vigorous tone of these two poems steer a vitality and endurance almost in a Whitmanian-like attitude. Nichols's optimistic and lively self is also "large and can contain multitudes" (Whitman, 1973: 88). Her 'fat' self, the ubiquitous, unabashed black woman is a being of extraordinary self-confidence and control. Such assertiveness is explicitly addressed in the poem "Assertion", in which she overtly exposes her right to "sit down on the golden stool of authority and refuses to move" (Nichols, 1984: 8):

> This is my birthright
> says the fat black woman
> giving a fat black chuckle
> showing her fat black toes (Nichols, 1984: 8)

For Nichols, the visibility of her fat black woman never exists in opposition to what is inside; that is, interior and exterior are constituted through the same gesture, a gesture of defiance and subversion. In fact, it comes as no surprise that she uses the material of the body as the logic or structure of her language. "More body, hence more writing", states Cixous in her essay The Laugh of the Medusa (Cixous, 1976: 257). It is not merely to stress the importance of the body as a source of imagination, but also to point to Nichols's writing as profoundly marked by cultural and social descriptions that aim at the disruption of racial and gender stereotypes. However, resignifying language as a bodily act to refute stererotypes is a subtle and yet, paradoxical question. On the one hand, identities and language are social constitutents that produce certain stable effects or meanings, and thus, their power to reinforce oppressions; but on the other hand, they may also exceed and transgress the initial and rhetorical context that they seek to effect. This

is so because language is a vulnerable and performative act through which human beings come to their existence.

Let me explain this point by arguing that language in the formation of the subject is paradoxical. Language not only gives us the power to name and to be named (positive and formative effect), but it also prevents us from the action of naming (prerogative effect). Power and language, in this way, though oppressors, are simultaneously productive. Such statement, which is based on the Foucaltian notion of power as both, productive and repressive, is vigorously supported by Judith Butler in her book Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative. Nonetheless, the American feminist philosopher establishes a further metaphorical link between what she calls hate speech (i.e. racist, sexist and homophobic speech) and bodily acts, inasmuch as certain bodies are already marked by those injurious words. For Butler, resistance can still be possible because the speech act cannot totally control the bodily effect; the bodily action of speech is not mecanically predictible, and so, "that the speech act is a bodily act does not mean that the body is fully present in its speech. The relationship between speech and body is that of a chiasmus" (Butler, 1997: 155). As indicated, body and speech are continuously interweaved, they do not always interact in the same time and in the same way. Thus, Butler asserts that the authority to name gender and race is not to be initiated by a sovereign subject or by the state (though it may be); rather, that operation may be performatively provoked out of diverse and contradictory subject positions that are likely to appropriate the author's discourse, and so, resignify terms such as "woman", "black", "queer", etc. in a positive sense. Such appropriation takes place because an authorized effect is produced where there is no prior form of authorization. In Butler's words: "Indeed, the efforts of performative discourse exceed and confound the authorizing contexts from which they emerge" (1997: 159). The concept of "performativity" is of utmost importance here in order to understand how history has contributed to the sedimentation, in an injurious way, of the categories of race and gender as if these were a natural given.

What is at stake here is to insist on the potential ability of language to reiterate terms in different contexts and with different meanings; this is, "understanding performativity as a renewable action without clear origin or end suggests that speech is finally constrained neither by its specific speaker nor its originating context. Not only defined by social context, such speech is also marked by its capacity to break with context. Thus, performativity has its own social temporality in which it remains enabled precisely by the contexts from which it breaks (...) The political possibility of reworking the force of the speech act against the force of injury consists in misappropriating the force of speech from those prior contexts" (Butler, 1997: 40).

Now, one core conclusion in this analysis is that the concept of performativity is not solely an individual and singular act, but most importantly, it is a social ritual that must be done for both, the formation of the subject and its own contestation in order to be redefined and resignified. This is the political promise of peformativity and it is with these postulates in mind that our poet, Grace Nichols, and as I see it, intends to resignify her own self and the community.

By displaying her 'bodily difference' in terms of gender, race, age and/or size, Nichols openly exposes male and female oppressions and abuses to black fat women in a critical way, in order to make the reader aware of the unfairness of the situation. For

example, in "Looking at Miss World", the fat black woman refuses to have her fat stereotyped and censored by challenging the notion that only slim white women can be beauty contestants. This poem, in which "the fat black woman awaits in vain while slim after slim aspirant appears" (1984: 20), attacks the notion that only thin white women should be considered beautiful and concludes with a mischievous hint that society does not know what is missing:

> Tonight the fat black woman
> is all agaze
> will some Miss (plump at least
> if not fat and black) uphold her name
>
> (...)
>
> And as the beauties yearn
> and the beauties yearn
> the fat black woman wonders
> when will the beauties
> ever really burn
>
> (...)
>
> The fat black woman gets up
> and pours some gin
> toasting herself as likely win (Nichols, 1984: 20)

Nichols's poetry brings out the importance of providing different practices that promote further agenda for destabilizing the interdependence between capitalism and slavery, between power and powerless. What this approach seems to suggest, though, is the potential inclusion of a long-running struggle to articulate a different relationship between capitalism and subversion. Likewise, in "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" Western and white women who impose the desirability of slim beauty on other women are challenged. The fashion industry is identified as conspiring to impose slimness on the female anatomy by only catering for women up to size fourteen. Her "difference" and diasporan identity is also expressed through the fat black woman's accent and a dispersed identity in-between the "brightness and billowing sunlight" of the Caribbean and "the weather so cold" of England (Nichols, 1984: 11). Fat black women also have to wrestle with being stereotyped as 'mamas'. In "The Fat Black Woman Remembers", where the name Jemina evokes the figure of the mammy in the film Gone with the Wind, the speaker finally refuses to be defined in this way: "But this fat black woman ain't no Jemina. Sure thing Honey/Yeah" (1984: 9). Obviously Nichols subverts traditional white definitions of black women as the source of dark and dangerous otherness by presenting ambivalent attitudes towards the woman's role. Thus, the notion of beauty which has been frequently constructed as a property of whites, is now transformed into a completely different aspect. Not only has the black (female) body been

often described as dehumanizing, alienating and amoral,[3] but also as inherent in its nature, so to speak. After the denial of race and gender as inevitable fixed sites of identification, though, a straight assertion does come to the foreground: what appeared as irrational images are nothing but the production and construction of white-(male)-racist beliefs. When it comes to occupying the position of the definer, a critical self-consciousness arises in Nichols's perspective and pervades her writings. From her vantage point, then, she asserts:

> Beauty
> is a fat black woman
> riding the waves
> drifting in happy oblivion
> while the sea turns back
> to hug her shape (Nichols, 1984: 7)

Central to the question of agency is the description of black female sexuality and how fat can be sexually attractive. The poem "Invitation" celebrates the fat female body and refuses to submit to censorship or misrepresentation of it. Through images of huge breasts and sleek limbs, her body invites -and receives- speculation. For a woman to be able to express her sexuality in such a blatant way, she has first to go through a radical break with masochistic looks of female victimization, for she does not accommodate the desires of (white) men. This is not an easy goal to achieve, specially considering that Nichols's woman suffers a triple oppression: she is black, female and fat. And yet, as I have been arguing, this woman proves to have her own space of identity and desire. By distancing herself from the canon of female beauty and sexuality, she can be said to disrupt the 'male gaze' and interrupt the pleasure of the canonical visual. Whether threatening or compelling, what seems to be telling, however, is that Nichols's texts draw attention to their own techniques in order to encourage the reader to reflect critically on the particular ways these images construct a different reality, or at the least, how it might all have happened differently.

Black women who struggle against sexist oppression within their own culture often meet with resistance from black males, who see this as undermining the unity of the black cause. In this way, black women experience conflict in allegiance between gender (by being a woman) and race (by being black).[4] So, although "male white blindness" is

---

[3] For an interesting analysis of how the presence of black people, in history and literature alike, has been relegated to live "outside the realm of reason", either by enforcing their visibility or through disturbing mis-representations, see Toni Morrison's Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. London: Picador, 1992.

[4] I am aware of the significant research in African-American feminist debates about the allegiance between race and gender. The pioneering article by Barbara Smith "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism", already pointed to the simultaneity of oppression in black women in that gender alone cannot be understood decontextualized from race, class and sexuality. Likewise, other theorists such as Rose M. Brewer points out that "although early-twentientieth century Black suffragettes saw women's rights as essential to relieving social skills, they repeatedly called attention to the issues of race. Nonetheless, within the rise of race, African-American women forged a feminist consciousness in the USA" (1993: 14). In their introduction to the book Theorizing Black Feminisms, (see Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia in the bibliography) it is argued how intersections of race, class and gender have contributed to a fuller

attacked in poems like "Afterword", the struggle against oppression by men of any colour comes through in Nichols's poetry. In "Trap Evasions", the speaker steers clear of the marriage trap where a wedding ring will be "one of the circles that lead nowhere" (1984: 14). Equally revealing in this poem is her attack on black men who see women just as childbears, merely replicating their subjugated position within the reproductive and domestic sphere of society.

Such a tendentious portrayal of women is implicitly linked to the role of science, religion, culture and history as contributors to black and female oppression. However, Nichols's strategy is to turn this female body and position into just so many metaphors, metaphors that no longer have anything to do with fixity, tokenism or homogeneity of the self. Hence, the deconstructive writer can safely draw wider spaces from which to re-describe renewed possibilities of agency. This is not to state that these possibilities do not exist; quite the opposite: they do exist within cultural discourses but only understood as culturally illicit and indecipherable. Here lies Nichols's ultimate challenge and triumph, since her poems enable the assertion of alternative and heterogeneous "bodies". To illustrate this point and, by and large, the main purpose of her poetry, one only has to look at her poem "Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath". The title itself already anticipates a sense of being blended and mixed within an eternal and cyclical imaginary. She is the creation of her own thoughts and words, and thus, the lazy tone evokes the idea of the speaker soaking in the bath in an air of carefree defiance:

> Steatopygous sky
> Steatopygous sea
> Steatopygous waves
> Steatopygous me
>
> O how I long to place my foot
> on the head of anthropology
>
> to swing my breasts
> in the face of history
>
> to scrub my back
> with the dogma of theology
>
> to put my soap
> in the slimming industry's
> profitsome spoke (Nichols, 1984: 15)

---

understanding of African-American life. Needless to cite, in this respect, the useful contributioremarked by bell hooks that analyze how often the assumptions of most white feminists overlook(ed) differences of class, age, religion, race, sexual preference, etc (bell hooks, 1984). Fortunately, from the last decade onwards, feminist studies have been growing in diversity and in theoretical frameworks that support such differences.

The word "steatopygous", meaning "wide-bottomed",[5] creates the impression of a scientific description, yet it also creates the speaker's identification with nature -with the sky, sea and waves- in a mischievous moment of ironic self-parody. "She is large and contains multitudes" (Whitman, 1973), her steatopygous body merges into a heterogeneous range of elements, she is one and yet her self embraces all. It is interesting to note here how this fat black woman's attitude resembles very much that of Cixous's "medusa". Incredibly spontaneous and ironic, Cixous writes: "Write!…with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colours, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed. Ah, there's her sea! … our seas are what we make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent, read or black, high or smooth, narrow or bankless; and we are ourselves sea…Heterogeneous, yes". (Cixous, 1976: 260)

Recalling these lines may corroborate the correlative relationship between Nichols's poetry and the postulates of French feminism. This is precisely because her poems are also heterogeneous and thus, the site of ambivalent readings and/or (theoretical) tensions. As I have already mentioned, some critics such as Gabrielle Griffin read these poems as written through the body, considering the body as a direct site of oppression through the tyranny of abuse and the tyranny of the beauty industry. The last stanza of this poem mirrors Nichols's attack on the slimming industry for making money out of women through the notion that only slim is beautiful. The word "spoke" stands for a heterogeneous wheel, the futile circle of the slimming syndrome. So, though invested with a great deal of comicity, this poem also deals a serious challenge to gendered conceptions of beauty, science, religion, history and culture.

So far I have concentrated on the first section of Nichols's text and how it puts forward most of her successful achievements through innovative language and concepts. As valuable as this, are the rest of her poems. Labelled as "In Spite of Ourselves", "Back Home Contemplation" and "i is a long memoried woman", they can be thematically grouped together since most of them approach the same issue: namely, the redefinition of her individual identity for the sake of the community. Now, this fat black woman's body performs the ritual of "flying back home", not so much out of finding her identity through stereotypes, as through a (nostalgic?) attempt to echo that black (female) survival entails a self-sacrifice which cannot be conceived outside the links of the community. Often, she refers to memories from her childhood ("Iguana Memory", "Childhood" and "Candlefly" illustrate this). Some of these poems are also dedicated to friends, to her mother or to anonymous members of the Black community, whose alienated bodies are still entrapped between magic dreams and menacing fears. Thus, poems such as "Island Man", "Two Old Black Mean on a Leicester Square Park Bench", "Those Women" and "Fear", comply with the idea that no matter where their bodies are settled down, "home is where the heart __lies" (1984: 84). And yet, Nichols's concept of living culture restores a shifting agency to colonized people. By introducing cultural elements of the black community -for example, Caribbean flowers, food, tropical fruits, music, animals and

[5] According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "Steatopygous" (from Steatopyga, fat, rump) is defined as "a protuberance of the buttocks, due to an abnormal accumulation of fat in and behind the hips and thights, found (more markedly in women than in men) as a racial characteristic of certain peoples, especially the Hottentots and Bushmen of South Africa". (OED, Second Edition. Vol. XVI, p. 604, my emphasis) As it can be observed, the definition of this technical word contains the main meanings that Nichols wants to subvert in her poems.

ultimately a distinct accent of English language- change can still be possible. Since the notion of living culture implies a productive and active site of identity contestation, the community is involved in this process of self-definition that by no means is trapped in a cultural essence. Similarly, Stuart Hall reminds us that cultural identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall, 1997)

Reading the presence of her fat black body as a cultural artifact, a terrain of contestation between and within different people, enables us to appreciate the articulation of femaleness and blackness in gender and racial relationships. In fact, her body, per se, can be considered a metaphor for the absent Caribbean, a narrative of recovery that reconciles different subject positions within a communal experience. Her presence is a diaspora body that no longer belongs to an exclussive terrain of identity.[6] The boundaries between the self and the community blur and meet through a recognition of identity formation. Moreover, such an act of survival becomes a dynamic process of intersubjectivity and interpersonal relations motivated by a desire for exchange that benefits both parts. She herself admits so at several instances:

> I need this link
> I need this touch
> of home (Nichols, 1984: 27)

> Or when she states:
> Don't be a kyatta-pilla
> Be a butterfly
> old preacher screamed
> to illustrate his sermon
> (...)
> Don't be a kyatta-pilla
> Be a butterfly
> Be a butterfly (Nichols, 1984: 49)

Only by transforming herself, can the community be simultaneously changed as well. Nichols's privileged position as the speaking voice for black women is clearly linked to the figure of the female ancestor and conjurer. Used as a narrative device, this timeless and spaceless person, represents a symbolic space with which to negotiate epic

[6] Again, I would like to clarify that although our poet uses physical and psychological traits that symbolize the Caribbean throughout her poetry, we should not forget that she does not refer to a homogeneous and unique experience. Nichols is indeed not only theorizing about different identities in Blackness (i.e. being a Caribbean-British woman), but also performing her identity in order to resist black stereotypes. Once again, the words conveyed by Stuart Hall are useful here: "The Diaspora experience is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference, by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (S. Hall, 1997)

spaces, including a connectedness to her Caribbean heritage. In "Sea Timeless Song", we do find an explicit reference to this figure, now compared to a "sea timeless". It seems, that once again, her 'timeless body' mirrors a "sea timeless" framed by the repetitive chorus of these two worlds. Like the water of the sea, the remembrance of her ancestors is rooted in an eternal return of sameness, and yet, of difference. As Gabrielle Graffin states, "Nichols uses her body and her voice to maintain her sense of selfhood, to support others and to subvert the structures that oppress her. She may have been exploited as a labouring force and as a sex object by black as well as white men, she may have been sexually colonized in order to provide a future slave force, she may have been "Alone, gathering, gathering" (1984: 10), but she refuses to accept the stereotype of the "long-suffering black woman" (Griffin, 1993: 32).

Even her silence is used as an imaginative space wherein the rituals of her ancestral community can take an active part. In this sense, Griffin also points to the reminiscences of an oral tradition in the use of her language, which "takes its rhythms and its inflections from the body" (Griffin, 1993: 26). In this way, the problems and digressions to have oral transcriptions inscribed are skillfully brought to light here. Breaks are created not by punctuation but by the need to draw breath, by how the body moves as it writes and recites. The fat black woman's identity is wholeheartedly chained to a musical tone that transcends the limits of the community and brings echoes of the past. In "Holding my Beads", for instance, I would say that she is tied to African roots, which after all, does not prevent her from finding "a room of her own". So, she claims:

> It isn't privilege or pity
> that I seek
> It isn't reverence or safety
> quick happiness or purity
> but
> the power to be what I am/ a woman
> charting my own futures/ a woman
> holding my beads in my hand (Nichols, 1984: 63)

Rather than use her body to mime the strings of an (un)certain destiny, this woman goes beyond the economy of the feminine object and shows the community that she can do more than merely reproduce her life and memories. She now has the power to provide new meanings and languages, to control and vindicate her female voice and subjectivity. Reclaiming the lost territory of women's bodies is a personal act that has a strong effect on women's identity and sense of control. None of these lines end with a full-stop, an idea which expresses more a sense of beginning than of ending. Very much related to this, is Nichols's rejection of conventional poetry structure. Her poetry is non-linear, non-chronological, but it deals with multiple realms--personal, community, family, history and even with myths. And yet, the division of her poems is not arbitrary at all, but are arranged to create a structural pattern that supports the discovery of her psychological and physical journey. Undoubtedly, the quest for self-definition and self-voice implies, in Nichols's work, a juxtaposition of particular and communal experiences. Imagination and dreams also participate in the struggle for the emancipation of women and blacks, not so much as an ideal but as an urgent need to redefine new and legitimized forms of identity.

At this point, it is useful to know how Nichols--as I see it-- departs somewhat from the postulates of Kristeva's semiotic order. Even though Nichols's writing could very well parallel what Kristeva has called "the semiotic order",[7] I believe that such an approach risks being defined as utopian and essentialist. Instead, I would argue that Nichols's fat black woman can, and in fact does use her body and voice to insert a proliferation of images. She does not reverse the binary relation between man/woman, white/black or beauty/ugliness as French feminists do in terms of gender dychotomy, for this would imply a radical female and black essentialist position. More importantly, as Judith Butler would suggest (Butler, 1990), Nichols takes apart the rigidity of such oppositions by constructing performative acts and gestures that call for an expansion of differences. Nichols argues for difference, but one that allows her to go beyond hegemonic views or "difference itself". Her deconstructive act questions the possible univocity of sameness and difference respectively. The individual and the community are no longer subject to totalitarian and monolithic conceptions of gender and race. As previously argued in relation to the performative force of language, gender and race can be also said to be performatively constructed,[8] sustained through a set of multiple and repetitive acts, all of which highlight the constructiveness of the cultural and female body, and ultimately, open a space for the transformation and proliferation of identities. In this way, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* ends with a poem that expresses a black woman's new identity:

> I have crossed an ocean
> I have lost my tongue
> From the root of the old one
> A new one has sprung (Nichols, 1984: 64)

[7] According to Kristeva (Moi, 1986, 90: 136), language is conceived as a dialogical site between 'the symbolic' and 'the semiotic', claiming that women's liberation of phallocentric constrains begins in the semiotic discourse of language. Unlike the symbolic order, in which the subject stands for the syntax and rules of conventional language, semiotic writing for Kristeva is concerned with the Freudian pre-Oedipal stage. In the latter, the infantile subject/writer, rather than identify with the father and the patriarchal logic, enjoys the pleasures of the maternal discourse, which is basically marked by stresses, rhythms and breaks in syntax and grammar.

[8] Apologies of the cultural and social construction of gender are well-known especially among postmodern and feminist studies. Equally, Judith Butler gives valuable insights into this relation with her notion of gender as a performance, even though gender performance as a parodic fiction of categories such as masculinity and femininity does not currently strike any chord. However, what is not so much explored is the wider context to which Butler refers with her notion of performance. She explicitly proposes that other categories such as race and sex should not be mitigated from their performative effects. Race, as well as gender, can be considered a performance that creates an allegorical fantasy that cannot be assumed as stable in the subject formation. Such performance is just a mere copy, not a deviant or alienated copy of a prior and superior race, since there is no original, prediscursive racial site which conforms human beings. Apart from the cited work by Toni Morrison herein, and more recently, a growing bulk of feminist and cultural studies has been focused on the articulation of Whiteness as a cultural constructed category. Richard Dyer in film and cultural studies, and C. Cuomo and K.Hall in philosophical and feminist studies, emphasize the need to study the racial formation of 'Whiteness' so as to desestabilize the hierarchy of races. By making Whiteness strange and visible, they insist on the contradictions and complexities of racist discursive effects.

When Nichols writes her body, she is making judgments, value judgments based on her own personal and cultural histories. To change the reading of a poem, of an image, means at the same time to break down existing cultural and social forms. This is the reason why the fat black woman is able to challenge the burden of representing female and racial injustice. Through shifting attitudes, highly invested with energy and force, she refuses to flaunt her body as a commodity that is there just to be used and manipulated. Nichols's body no longer stands for commodification but for a source of common-identification on behalf of the community. This is not to say, however, that a common identification associated to the woman's body remains another problematic site for many women, since once again, it is necessary to take into consideration the fact that such identification is positive and non-stereotyped. Being aware of the potential risk of making women stereotyped again, I would still indicate that, within this new common-identification, women may find a wider and liberating space from which to express varied identities. Although the first change would have to be made individually, I believe that repetition and iterability of different attitudes could, indeed, be a reflective mirror for the community gradual change. The exploration of Nichols subjectivity does not so much present a didactic mode of behaviour as a cultural and political assertiveness of self-definition and change. This figure embodies an enthusiasm for complete rupture with the oppressive patterns of the past. In Nichols's work, the desire to turn black female writing into the medium of cultural rebirth and to reinvent oneself through rituals of remembrance, is a political act. It cannot be reduced to a mere interpretation of reality but rather, it is a sign of vitality within literature and feminism.

Bibliographical References

Brewer M. Rose. "Theorizing Race, Class and Gender". In Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia (eds.). 1993. Theorizing Black Feminisms. The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women. London and New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1990. Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London and New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1997. Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative. London and New York: Routledge.

Cixous, Hélène. 1976. "The Laugh of the Medusa". In Signs, Summer, pp. 39-54.

Cuomo C. and Hall, K. 1999.Whiteness. Feminist Philosophical Reflections. Lanham, New York, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Dyer, Richard. 1997. White. London and New York: Routledge.

Griffin, Gabrielle. 1993. "Writing the Body: Reading Joan Ridley, Grace Nichols and Ntozake Shangs". In Wisker, Gina (ed). Black Women's Writing. New York: St. Martin's Press, pp. 19-42.
Hall, Stuart. 1997. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". In Kathryw Woodward (ed.), Identity and Difference. London: Sage Publications.
Hooks, bell. 1984. Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. Boston: South End Press, pp. 1-15)
Mercer, Kobena. 1988. "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation". In Black Film, British Cinema. Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA): London
Morrison, Toni. 1992. Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. London: Picador.
Moi, Toril (ed.) 1986. The Kristeva Reader. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Nichols, Grace. 1984. *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. London: Virago Press.
Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Feminism", In Showalter, Elaine (ed.). 1985. The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. London: Virago Press.
Whitman, Walt. 1973. "Song of Myself". In Leaves of Grass. New York: A. Norton Critical Edition.